Background:

Dreams are something that endlessly fascinate to me in their complexity, unpredictability, and inconsistency. They are one of the areas of psychology that has only barely been explored which is why I chose to explore this area of psychology. My research question was, “Do dreams have any consistency or pattern in their content?” or more generally: “Why do we dream what we dream?” This question was slowly refined as I learned more about prior research.

One study by Robert Stickgold sought to control dream content. He had a total of 27 participants in his study. Each day participants received some type of training in the game of Tetris. There were 3 hours of training on the first day of the study and 2 hours of training each day for the consecutive days of the study both in the morning and evening. The study only lasted for three days, but Stickgold was able to find significant results in that short period of time. Seventeen of his 27 participants had dreams about falling blocks (the main component of Tetris) in the first hour of dreaming. Stickgold showed that the content of dreams can be manipulated by providing certain stimuli for set periods of time.

Another study that looked at the content of dreams was one by Richard Schweickert. Schweickert sought to discover how the general properties of memory organization related to the organization of complex memories like dreams. He had participants record their dreams, and he focused on the social networks that developed within participants’ dreams. Social networks were his tool to look at the organization of complex memory. Schweickert determined that the more an individual was dreamt about by a participant was indicative of how important that individual was to the participant. With this idea, he developed quite accurate social networks of his participants and their social interactions. In summary, Schweickert discovered the role of familiar characters and the presence of social networks in dreams.

In my study, I sought to combine these two psychologists’ findings. I attempted to manipulate my subjects’ dreams by consistently exposing them to the same or similar stimuli, and as these stimuli (clips from a familiar television show) included characters, I hoped that these specific characters would be incorporated into my subjects’ dream social networks.

Methods:

I took all of my participants for my study from the 2nd floor of Snyder Hall, so they were all female, MSU freshmen. I started with a total of 20 participants in my study. I had initial face-to-face contact with all participants when I recruited them for my study, but had intermittent face-to-face contact thereafter. Most contact I had with my participants was through e-mail. It was in this format, e-mail, that I instructed my participants of the following:

“For the next ten days you watch an *SNL* clip that I will e-mail to you (check your e-mail) right before bed. Try to make it the last thing you do before bed. Also, please record how much sleep you get each night. Keep a notepad or something next to your bed so immediately after waking up you can right down your dreams and WHO appears in your dreams. It's important to write the dreams down immediately because dreams and especially the details of dreams are usually forgotten very quickly.”

This is an excerpt from the original e-mail I sent to my participants on the first day of the study. As mentioned, the study lasted a total of ten days, and participants watched a clip from *Saturday Night Live*, a popular late night television show, immediately before falling asleep. The clips were all approximately five minutes in length and included the current full-time *SNL* actors as well as guests on the show. The links to these clips can be found in the resources section of this paper. I chose *SNL* clips as the stimulus for my participants because I knew it would be something familiar, entertaining, and easily understood by all participants. I wanted the stimulus to have these attributes to encourage students to watch the clips and make it less of a chore to participate in my study. Also, I chose them because I knew they were easily accessible to me as well as to my participants. At the end of the study, I had all participants either e-mail me their data or I collected their dream journals from them, if that was more convenient. I entered all of the data into a variety of tables and graphs to fully analyze it.

Results:

In my study, I encountered one primary difficulty in gaining results. This difficulty was subject participation. Five subjects failed to participate in the study at all; they dropped out of the study without watching a single *SNL* video or recording a single dream. Three subjects failed to report back to me their results although they claimed to have participated. This left me with twelve subjects out of my initial twenty who even participated in any part of the study. Furthermore, seven of my final twelve only partially participated in the study, and did not watch the films each night. With only five participants who fully participated in my study, results (related to my initial goal of manipulating dream content) should be taken with a grain of salt, and it should be understood that the scope of the results for this data are severely limited. Regardless of this problem, I was able to come up with some interesting conclusions.

Firstly, there was no significant data related to the *SNL* videos. There was a small amount of data that suggested with further manipulations to the study, perhaps having the participants watch a full episode for example, that there would be a significant result. The small amount of data included one person who did have an *SNL* character in her dream and another subject who had dream content directly related to the *SNL* clip for that day. However, these two examples were far from significant data to draw a conclusion from. Overall, this was disappointing but through further analysis of the data, I was able to discover other interesting insight into my participants’ dreams.

One thing I discovered was a clear replication of Schweickert’s results. In almost every dream my participants had, someone familiar and close to them was present. Most often it was college and high school friends. Other characters that showed up quite frequently in my participants’ dreams were parents, siblings, and significant others. Schweickert stated that the more times a character appears in one’s dreams, the more important that person is to the individual. In my study, this was displayed in numerous participants. One participant had her boyfriend appear in 3 dreams out of the 7 she remembered, and another dream included her boyfriend’s dog. Another participant had the same 2 close college friends appear in 3 out of the 7 dreams she remembered. Even when participants had dreams about completely abstract and unknown persons (like a killer with a gun, Santa’s elves, James Bond, or a mob of drunken students), familiar persons like family and friends were present in the same dream as the unknown character(s). I was able to replicate Schweickert’s general conclusion quite well even though Stickgold’s findings remained foreign to my study. Perhaps this is because my study was a better replication of Schweickert’s study than Stickgold’s and incorporated more aspects of Schweickert’s study.

Other interesting results I discovered included the overall number of dreams that participants had depending on whether or not they watched the *SNL* clip. When students watched the clip they dreamt more that those that did not watch the video. This is represented in the following graph:

This data is presented in percentages. 36.11% for those that watched the *SNL* clips and 16.67% for those that did not watch the *SNL* clips. These percentages were calculated from the total number of dreams participants had divided by the total number of nights the *SNL* clips were watched (or not watched). It seems that the presence of a visual stimulus immediately before sleep onset either creates more dreams or somehow enhances the memory of the individual exposed to the stimulus. It is impossible to determine from my data which of these, memory or quantity of dreams, is the result of the visual stimulus, but with further study this could be determined.

Lastly, I wanted to present some suggestive data. After looking at the content of my subjects’ dreams, I discovered that there was a high percentage of abstract dreams. By abstract, I mean that their dreams included either unrealistic characters or situations. An example of an unrealistic character could be a dinosaur, and an example of an unrealistic situation would be frogs coming out of the toilet. Overall, participants who I had recorded dream content from (only had data for the nights that SNL clips were watched) had abstract content in 82.4% of their dreams. I’m unsure how much this deviates from the normal amount of abstract dreams because of my lack of data from those who did not watch the films every night, but it certainly does seem to be a high percentage. While REM dreams tend to be vivid, I’m unsure of the quantity of abstract dreams present. Perhaps the abstract dreams are solely from the REM sleep stage and the realistic dreams are occurring in some other stage of sleep. This would clearly be something for further study.

Discussion:

As I mentioned before, my data specifically aligned with the current theories about social networks and dreams by replicating Schweickert’s general results. However, as dreams have been studied only a limited amount, there is very little to compare my other results to. Primarily, my results serve to incite thought about dreams, their content, and the impact of stimuli on either dream recall or quantity. The results of my study provide a variety of concepts for further study.

Although I did find numerous interesting results from my study, they were mostly unrelated to my original research goals. I wanted to address the problems with my research that resulted in a lack of significant data relating the *SNL* videos to my subjects’ dream content. One problem I believe was my lack of data overall. As many participants failed to fully participate in the study, a large portion of my data was irrelevant for analysis. If this study was replicated and some incentive was given to participants, there may have been a greater rate of participation and more significant data related to the *SNL* clips. Another factor that may have contributed to the lack of significant data could have been the fact that each clip did not have the same actors. It would have been difficult for my subjects to dream about the actors in the *SNL* clips if there was not consistency. The lack of consistency in actors would make the fact that the study lasted ten days nearly irrelevant. There were clearly a lot of problems with my original design even though I was able to find some interesting results unrelated to my research goal. If I had found the expected results of my study, there would have been implications for the manipulation of dreams. The purpose of manipulating dreams may be unclear, but one possibility for manipulating dreams could include therapy. There is a strong belief that dreams are a type of coping mechanism as indicated in the study by Peterson, Henke and Hayes on Limbic System function and dream content. If this is true, then presenting a problem a patient is trying to cope with prior to sleep would induce dreams about that problem and therefore further help coping. This would be the case if my data had produced the expected result. If my data had produced the expected result the implications for society and psychology could include the development of an entire new type of therapy, dream therapy.

Resources:

SNL Video links:

1. <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/secret-word/1178405/>
2. [http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/scared-straight/1173627/](http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/scared-straight/1173627/?__cid=thefilter)
3. [http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/driving-psa/1173637/](http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/driving-psa/1173637/?__cid=thefilter)
4. [http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/taylor-swift-monologue/1173589/](http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/taylor-swift-monologue/1173589/?__cid=thefilter)
5. [http://www.nbc.com/Saturday\_Night\_Live/video/clips/nprs\_delicious\_dish\_\_schweddy\_balls/999481[1](http://www.nbc.com/Saturday_Night_Live/video/clips/nprs_delicious_dish__schweddy_balls/999481%5b1)]
6. <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/update-sandler-hanukkah-song/1179506/>
7. [http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/debbie-downer-thanksgiving-dinner/1179438/](http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/debbie-downer-thanksgiving-dinner/1179438/?__cid=thefilter)
8. <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/d-in-a-box/1177625/>
9. <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/rockettes-open-audition/2847/>
10. <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/clips/celebrity-jeopardy-cruise-sandler-connery/278291/>

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5. Schweickert, Richard. "Properties of the organization of memory for people: Evidence from dream reports." *Properties of the organization of memory for people: Evidence from dream reports* 14.2 (2007): 270-76. Psychonomic Bulletin & Review, 17 May 2006. Web. 6 Dec. 2009. <http://pbr.psychonomic-journals.org/content/14/2/270.long>.